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Margaret CHAN

Singapore Management University, margarechan@smu.edu.sg

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Singapore Food, Seriously on my Mind

Margaret Chan

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On the first night in Sydney, there were just two of us, and we went to eat Thai because it was the only Asian restaurant on the street. “Ahhhh,” said my Japanese friend, “Singapore noodles, my favourite.” She clapped her hands in an adorable *kawaii* way, and her enthusiasm was such, I did not want to tell her that Singapore noodles in Australia and Britain is *not* Singapore noodles. I chose *laksa* (yes, in a Thai restaurant). It came with thin *beehoon*, not the ‘correct’ *thick* vermicelli. “Oh well.”

On the second night, some 20 of us went to eat at Temasek Restaurant. I had *laksa* — again — a choice that derived (I would like to think), from a deep instinct, rather than a limited imagination. Again it was made with *thin beehoon*, but at least the gravy was “authentic.” The *rendang* was “real,” so too the *chendol*. On the third night, I hopefully suggested Temasek again, but our party had a Japanese majority, who voted with their feet — dinner was at a Japanese restaurant.

What makes a Singaporean eat *laksa* two meals in a row, when a Russian would not? For one thing, we have *langkwas*, *serai*, *kunyit*, *belacan*, *haybee*, they have beetroot. This suggests a connection with geography, and perhaps dietary ecology. Maybe Singaporeans have a “*laksa*” gene. D’Adamo theorised that our earliest ancestors, Cro-Magnon, were ‘O’ blood-type meat-eaters. They were such successful hunters;

Cro-Magnon killed off all the game herds and so starved to death. The Neolithics, who followed, made a start with agriculture evolving into 'A' blood types better disposed to digesting grain.¹ People had become omnivorous in order to survive.

The omnivore, however, faced a dilemma: A wider diet meant experimenting with a wider variety of foods, and this translated into greater exposure to eating something unsafe. And so people invented cooking and cuisine.² Cuisines often ritualise food safety; for example, the proscription against pork in Middle-Eastern cuisines stemmed from a worry concerning the pig's filthy feeding habits.³ In this way, eating developed into a culture. "All animals feed but humans alone eat," noted Farb and Armalegos.⁴ People became familiar with the specific foods of their community which became their "habitus," that Bourdieuan concept of "systems of durable, transposable dispositions."⁵ This is why it is not only I, but also Lim Swee Say, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, who must have *laksa*. This food was what he missed most as a student in the UK in the 1970s.⁶ What then might be Singapore food? A *Straits Times* report on a hawker food promotion at Fullerton Hotel provided some answers.⁷

For 62-year-old Lim Soon Hock, Singapore food is about the memories of childhood meals with his father at food-stalls along Singapore River; "the stench of the

¹ D'Adamo, Peter J. *Eat Right 4 Your Type*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996.

² Rozin, Elizabeth. "The Structure of Cuisine," in Lewis M Barker (ed.), *The Psychobiology of Human Food Selection*, Westport, CT: AVI, 1982, pp. 189–203.

³ Harris, Marvin. "The Abominable Pig," in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds) *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Second Edition, New York: Routledge, (1997), 2008, pp. 54–66.

⁴ Farb, Peter and George J. Armelagos. *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980, p. 3.

⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 53.

⁶ Lim in Kong, Lily. *Singapore Hawker Centres: People, Places, Food*. Singapore: National Environment Agency, 2007, p. 106.

⁷ Toh, Wen Li. "Famous Hawkers' Buffet at Riverside," *The Straits Times*, Friday 18 May 2012, *Life!*: D17.

Singapore River, the high humidity on hot afternoons, the congestion and jostling through large office crowds.” Sixty-five-year-old Chan Heng Wing was adamant about traditional recipes. *Char kway teow* has to be fried with lard, he said, “God forbid the day when people fry their *char kway teow* in olive oil.”

However, Singapore’s former number one Mandarin, Ngiam Tong Dow, who was at the hawker fest with Lim and Chan, was unsentimental. Singapore, advised Ngiam, should industrialise and modernise its local food. This suggests that items such as Ya Kun Kaya Toast, Hock Lam Beef Noodles, Nam Seng Noodles, Kim Choo Kueh Chang, Annie’s Peanut Ice Kachang, Pagi Sore, Hoo Kee Rice Dumpling and Teck Kee Tanglin Pau (which were on the Fullerton Hotel spread), might be analysed and quantified into formulae that would reproduce exact tastes and textures *en masse*, over and over again. The idea of mechanisation might seem to be the very antithesis of a food of a people, but that’s what we’re all eating today, and we’re becoming fat, very fat, for it. Industrialization is the latest development in the human dietary evolution. It has produced a super abundance of inexpensive, high-density foods which we often eat sitting in front of the TV or the computer.⁸ The consequence is nightmarish: Worldwide, obesity has more than doubled since 1980. In 2008, more than 1.4 billion adults were overweight of whom, 200 million men and 300 million women were obese.⁹

Mr Ang Hak Seng, Chief Executive of the Health Promotion Board (HPB) tells that obesity in Singapore has jumped from seven percent in 2004 to 11 percent in 2010,

⁸ Armelagos, George J. “The Omnivore’s Dilemma: The Evolution of the Brain and the Determinants of Food Choice,” *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 66 (2), Summer 2010: 161–86.

⁹ World Health Organization. “Obesity and overweight,” Fact sheet No. 311, May 2012 <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs311/en/> accessed 12 Oct. 2012.

and although there are not as many fat Singaporeans as there are fat Americans (35 percent), British (26 percent) and Australians (25 percent), Ang says we are close to the tipping point. Ang has taken the fight to the hawker centres since almost 70 percent of Singaporeans eat at least one meal at a hawker centre daily.¹⁰ The *Healthier Hawker Program*, launched in July 2006, is aimed at coaxing hawkers to cook with healthier ingredients; for instance, vegetable oil instead of lard. I went, in September 2012, to check out a hawker centre where the “Healthier Choice” symbol (a red triangle on a white badge) was pasted on many stalls. In the busy lunch period that I spent there, I did not see anyone ask for high-fibre noodles or unpolished rice. My impression was that both customers and hawkers were too harassed to even think of new choices. HPB’s CEO Ang knows the problem and he has made arrangements at some food places for the reverse to happen. Unless you specify “unhealthy,” you automatically get your food with less oil, less sugar, and less salt.¹¹ Ang hopes that in time, our tastebuds will get re-educated.¹²

This intervention is timely, for with the rise in dual-career families, fewer meals are being eaten at home. In Singapore in 2011, the married labour force participation rate was 85 percent for men, and 60 percent for women.¹³ A 2005 survey of 100 Singaporean and 100 Malaysian youngsters reported that while 32.9 percent of Malaysian youths had their lunch prepared at home, only 7.2 percent of young

¹⁰ Long, Susan. “Promoting Health, One Hawker Meal at a Time,” *The Straits Times*, Friday, 5 Oct. 2012, *Opinion*: A33.

¹¹ Ibid. This healthy food scheme is in place in hawker centres in Yuhua, Eunos Crescent, Haig Road, Geylang Serai, and Marine Terrace, and in six coffeeshops in Woodlands, Bedok, Bukit Batok and Jurong East. The scheme will be extended to 25 food places by end 2012.

¹² For more on the Singapore fight against obesity, see Goh, Lee Gan and Jonathan Pang. “Obesity in Singapore, Prevention and Control,” *The Singapore Family Physician*, 3 (1), Jan.–Mar. 2012: 8–13.

¹³ Ministry of Social and Family Development, MSF. “Women and the Economy: Labour Force Participation Rate (Married Females),” <http://app.msf.gov.sg/ResearchRoom/ResearchStatistics/LabourForceParticipationRateMarriedFemales.aspx> accessed 2 Nov. 2012.

Singaporeans ate a home-cooked lunch.¹⁴ Professor May Wong, speaking at a seminar on food choices being made in Singapore homes, cited a survey of 130 Singapore women in which respondents said they were just too busy to cook. Weekends were a frenzy of ferrying children from one activity to another, for enrichment education is high priority with Singapore parents. Respondents also pointed out that it was cheaper to buy pre-prepared food than to cook at home.¹⁵ Professor Wong further revealed that unlike in the west, where children ate what was put in front of them, in Singapore homes, the food-choices were often made by children. This last bit of information is not surprising for we know how Singaporean parents mix the Chinese penchant for growing little emperors with notions of western liberalism in a sure recipe for rule by child. I am sure we need only ask around to hear Singapore stories similar to those told by Yan, an anthropologist who researched the fast-food scene in China. One report was of a Beijing family who regularly went to McDonald's because the daughter loved the food. It was irrelevant that mother did not like, and father absolutely abhorred hamburgers.¹⁶

Watson believes that American fast-food succeeded in China because the industry had entered into a society that was witnessing the collapse of an outdated Confucian family system. Until the 1980s, he noted, few Chinese children ate meals outside their homes, now youngsters aged three and four can walk up to a counter, slap down money and order their own food. For the first time in history, writes Watson,

¹⁴ Lew, K. and P. J. Barlow, "Dietary Practices of Adolescents in Singapore and Malaysia," *Singapore Med J*, 46 (6), 2005: 282–88, p. 282.

¹⁵ Wong, May. "Food Provision and Food Choice Decision-Making: The Changing Role of Women in Singapore," *Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore Seminar Series*, 18 Sep. 2012. Wang is Associate Professor of Community Health Sciences at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, Los Angeles, and an ARI affiliate.

¹⁶ Yan, Yunxiang. "Of Hamburgers and Social Space: Consuming McDonald's in Beijing," in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds), *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Second Edition, New York: Routledge, (1997), 2008, pp. 500–22: 512.

children are “full-scale consumers who command respect in today’s economy”.¹⁷ And it’s *western* fast-food that our economically empowered youth want. Yan tells how a “war of fried chickens” erupted in Beijing in 1989–1990 with the likes of Lingzhi Roast Chicken and Ronghua Fried Chicken rising up to take on KFC. The Chinese eateries failed miserably. So Chinese fast-food restaurants began to offer local fare. In 1992, the Jinghe Kuaican Company, representing nearly a thousand state-owned restaurants, offered five sets of value meals and more than 50 fast-food items cooked to traditional recipes; but the business folded as quickly as it opened.¹⁸ Lew and Barlow report that more than 89 percent of the Singaporean youths they surveyed ate at western fast food restaurants. More than 66 percent went once a week, but some ate western fast-food eight times, even more, a week.¹⁹

In order to understand why the Americans succeeded when the Chinese failed, we need to think of “cuisine” beyond the narrower posh sense of the word to Belasco’s wider definition of the concept, which includes food selectivity (preferred cooking styles, food flavours and food aesthetics) with food eating rituals, and also the organised systems of producing and distributing the food.²⁰ McDonald’s must be studied as an industry that retails culture. A Chinese mother told Yan how she had made a great effort to adapt to the taste of burgers so she could take her daughter to eat at McDonald’s twice a week. The mother wanted her daughter to learn about American culture and be able to type in English for she planned to buy her child a computer. Yan writes of the McDonald’s experience as a multidimensional social space. Eating at McDonald’s connected the

¹⁷ Watson, James L. “China’s Big Mac Attack,” in James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell (eds), *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, p. 74.

¹⁸ Yan, “Of Hamburgers and Social Space, p. 503–04.

¹⁹ Lew and Barlow, “Dietary Practices of Adolescents,” p. 284.

²⁰ Belasco, Warren. “Food and the Counterculture: A Story of Bread and Politics,” in James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell (eds), *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 217–34: 219–20.

Chinese diners with the rest of the world. Dining on foreign foods allowed them to think of themselves as young professionals. And because McDonald's does not sell alcohol, women feel comfortable eating at McDonald's alone. At Chinese restaurants, the single women diner is surveyed as a prostitute.²¹

What McDonald's did was create a habitus. Another example of a food habitus is the Japanese station box lunch (ekibento, ekiben for short), a tradition that originated from the portable rice ball and pickles which were already written about in the Japanese eleventh century literary classic, *The Tale of Genji*. Noguchi writes about travelling through Japan eating regional and seasonal specialties sold at train stations, for instance, *fugu* (blowfish), sold only at Shimonoseki Station between November and March. And of course there is the institution of the obento children lunch boxes symbolising "an ideology which encodes motherhood, education, and the state."²²

If Singapore would start a food revolution, what are the stories we might tell? For one, we can celebrate our squeaky-clean reputation. Ten new hawker centres are coming up in the next five years. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources told *The Sunday Times* these new eating places would preferably be run on a not-for-profit basis, and would probably be located near community facilities to continue the evolution of the hawker centre as a uniquely Singaporean communal space.²³ Can we expect a revolutionary new concept to eating-out in Singapore? Think how the open kitchen has become a standard design at swanky restaurants. It started off as a window on celebrity chefs at work, but now it is because people want to be

²¹ Yan, "Of Hamburgers and Social Space, p. 507–13.

²² Noguchi, Paul H. "Savor Slowly: Ekiben: The Fast Food of High-Speed Japan," *Ethnology*, 33 (4), Autumn, 1994: pp. 317–30: 318.

²³ Zaccheus, Melody. "3 Towns to Get New Hawker Centres," *The Sunday Times*, 21 Oct. 2012, *Home*, p. 15.

connected to the cooking they're eating and they want to know that the food is being prepared in sterile, stainless steel environments. Have we thought of parading dish-washing systems?

I think we need an industry that produces and delivers wholesome meals, perhaps to childcare centres, to be picked up by parents who come to fetch their children home, or to be delivered to the door in a postal-type service. And if institutional cooking sounds most unappetising, remember that one important reason for McDonald's success is its standardised food. A Big Mac in China is likely to taste rather like a Big Mac in Iceland or Singapore. So perhaps we should forget about making tasty *laksa* with low-fat milk, and think instead of unheard-of recipes and never-before-seen restaurant service, developed perhaps in annual competitions where youngsters sit as judges. As Gary Hamel bluntly puts it, "the conversation about 'where we go next' should be dominated by individuals who have their emotional equity invested in the future rather than the past."²⁴ This, I think, would be Singapore food for me, nothing short of a culinary reformation.

Glossary:

beehoon: (H) thin, dried, rice-flour noodles.

belacan: (M) fermented shrimp paste (like anchovies)

char kway teow: (H) Literally stir-fried rice-flour ribbons.

chendol: (M) green-coloured mung bean-flour vermicelli (rather like spätzle), with candied red (azuki) beans in coconut milk sweetened with palm sugar.

hay bee: (H) dried shrimp

kawaii: (J) cute

kunyit: (M) tumeric

laksa: (H) thick, freshly-made, rice-flour noodles in spicy-coconut gravy. I propose that this word is not Malay, but derives from the Hokkien *luak sha* ("spicy sand," because the thick gravy resembles an old Hokkien dish that used ground peanut which looked "sandy". Only Chinese, not Malays cook this dish.

langkwat: (M) galangal

rendang: (M) beef slow-stewed in a dark, coconutty curry.

serai: (M) lemon grass

²⁴ Hamel, Gary. *What Matters Now: How to Win in a World of Relentless Change, Ferocious Competition, and Unstoppable Innovation*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012. (This quote comes from a blurb on Hamel's book, on *Leadership Now*, "Leading Blog," http://www.leadershipnow.com/leadingblog/2012/05/what_matters_now.html accessed 13 Oct. 2012.

H=Hokkien; J=Japanese; M=Malay

Margaret Chan is Associate Professor of Theatre/Performance Studies, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University. Margaret Chan was a foodwriter for 18 years from the 1980s–1990s. She is an anthropologist researching in spirit possession.